Refugee Women

The explosion of ethnic conflicts in the 1990s, as the end of the cold war unfroze long-dormant disputes, has created humanitarian crises whose number and magnitude seem to increase dramatically every year. In 1994, the scale and geographical spread of such violent upheavals reached proportions that have few parallels in recent history. In tiny Rwanda, in the space of less than four months, between half and two thirds of the country's population were killed, died from epidemic diseases, or fled. It was the largest and most catastrophic exodus the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has ever witnessed. Among the hardest hit by the violence and uncertainty of displacement were young girls, elderly widows, single mothers — women.

Protection is at the heart of the responsibility that the world bears towards refugees. Protection means freedom from assault. Deprived of the protection of their State, detached from their families and communities of origin, and considered helpless foreigners in an alien land, refugees are, by definition, in any culture, vulnerable to violence. Refugee women and their children are the most vulnerable of all. Despite the strength and courage that have carried them out of their homelands, refugee women have special needs in terms of shelter, supplies and health care. They also require measures to protect them from sexual violence and exploitation in all phases of their lives as refugees.

The problem is vast, though a complete picture is not available. Statistics on refugees and asylum seekers are, even today, rarely broken down by gender. UNHCR estimates that 23 million refugees and 26 million internally displaced people have been forced to leave their homes because of conflict, massive human rights abuse, or the direct effects of conflict, such as famine and lawlessness. As a rule of thumb, more than three quarters of those destitute displaced people are women and their dependent children. That proportion of women and children may rise to 90 per cent in some refugee populations, when husbands or fathers are killed, or taken prisoner, or drafted as combatants. Most take refuge in remote, poorly developed areas where there is little security. Many have already been attacked — exactly how many is simply not known. "Sexual violence against women is widespread", says UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata. She calls the phenomenon "a global outrage".

Sexual violence and exploitation

Rape is a common element in the pattern of persecution or terror or "ethnic cleansing" that drives refugee families from their homes, and civilians increasingly become the intentional targets — rather than the accidental victims — of warfare. From Myanmar to Somalia and Bosnia, refugee families frequently cite rape or the fear of rape as a key factor in their decision to leave.

Subsequently, the road to asylum is itself paved with threats of sexual violence and exploitation. The perpetrators may be bandits, smugglers, border guards, police, military and irregular forces on both sides of the border, or elements of local populations taking advantage of defenceless arriving refugees. The need to cross military lines or regions affected by lawlessness or civil war to reach safety puts women and girls at particular risk.

Once in exile, women and girls are still vulnerable to sexual violence or exploitation, by camp officials or other refugees. Some countries automatically incarcerate people who enter without visas in detention cen-

tres, often alongside hardened criminals. In some cases they detain women or young children together with adult men. The potential for abuse in such circumstances is obvious. In camps, refugee women may be forced into sex in exchange for material assistance for themselves or their children — particularly if the distribution of basic supplies is left to all-male camp committees. Officials, too, sometimes use rations or identity papers in order to sexually coerce women. Domestic violence often escalates with the pressures, disruptions, confinement or enforced idleness of refugee life. Later, victims of sexual violence may be further assaulted because of the shame they are alleged to have brought on their society.

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In 1993, the incidence of rape was reported to be alarmingly high at camps for Somali refugees in Kenya, which were located in isolated areas plagued by bandits and Somali militia. Hundreds of women refugees were raped in night raids, or while foraging for firewood. UNHCR set up a pilot project to improve protection. The camps were fenced with thorn-bushes and protected by expanded patrols. Vulnerable women were relocated to safer areas. Community outreach was expanded. A number of victims of violence, who were suffering from acute forms of ostracism, were relocated to other refugee camps or given more rapid opportunities for resettlement abroad.

How to protect refugees from sexual violence

UNHCR has developed formal guidelines on preventing and responding to sexual violence, based on detailed recommendations by fieldworkers experienced with the rapes of and piracy attacks on Vietnamese boat people, the rapes of Somali women in Kenya, or the barbarous "ethnic cleansing" rapes of Bosnian women. The guidelines aim to provide fieldworkers with practical, non-specialist advice on the medical, psychological and legal ramifications of sexual violence. They are also intended to dispel the discomfort of many refugee workers with such acts — or any tendency to dismiss them as an inevitable by-product of social breakdown. Ann Howarth-Wiles, UNHCR's Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women, calls the guidelines "a fundamental primer" that should "immeasurably improve the sensitivity and skills of people who work with refugees, whether for UNHCR or our implementing partners".

UNHCR has also developed gender training, known as People Oriented Planning (POP), to encourage staff to focus on the protection and assistance needs of refugee women. A key element is encouraging women to participate in camp decision-making and the distribution of basic supplies. When men claim that women have no traditional role in decision-making, UNHCR staff encourage women to form separate committees. The alternative — leaving key decisions and distribution in the hands of all-male groups — has in the past led to the theft or misuse of key supplies, sexual exploitation, and the failure to supply key basics to very vulnerable families, especially those headed by women.

Not every group of refugees can easily accept the empowerment of women. The problem is compounded when refugees come from very conservative societies, which may react to exposure to a foreign environment by even more extreme practices. UNHCR staff report that among Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the practice of purdah has actually intensified during exile. Women who had previously worked in fields alongside male members of their family are no longer even permitted to leave their compounds, because of the mixing of various tribes and communities in the camps. To ensure proper health care for such women, and a modicum of skills, literacy and nutrition training, UNHCR has taken steps to increase the number of its female staff officers — who must often focus their initial, confidence-building efforts on elderly women (less socially restricted) and young children.

In an emergency situation, a proper focus on women's particular needs may, in practice, be close to impossible to maintain. Faced with an overwhelming inflow, such as the quarter of a million panicked and dying people who daily flooded out of Rwanda in the first few days of August 1994, field staff can often do little more than identify a few members of the most vulnerable groups, and perhaps sketch the basic foundations of intelligent camp design. In emergency situations, refugee families may be obliged to share tents. Hastily constructed latrines and washing facilities may offer little privacy, or be located too far from living areas. In extreme circumstances, sufficient food may not be getting to the most vulnerable members of a social group, such as widows with children, or elderly women on their own. Such

circumstances are not acceptable, and are never tolerated for long. UNHCR field staff are, without exception, committed to maintaining proper assistance to all refugees.

Redefining women's refugee status

Many women have trouble substantiating their claims to refugee status, especially if those claims are based on sexual persecution. Though no gender restriction was intended, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees that is the bedrock of UNHCR's work was written using male pronouns. It defines a refugee in terms of a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or "membership of a particular social group". UNHCR has issued policy statements encouraging countries to consider that when rape or other forms of sexual violence are committed for reasons of race or political opinion, for example — and particularly when this is condoned by the authorities concerned — then they should be grounds for refugee status.

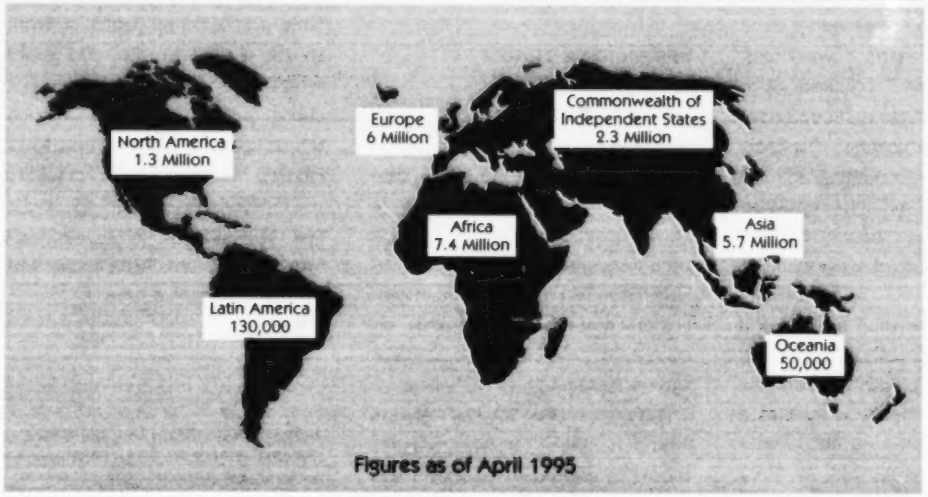
Some countries have recognized this, and in addition have ruled that women who face inhumane treatment because of perceived transgressions of social mores should be eligible for refugee status, as members of a "particular social group". Canada, for example, has recognized that a woman should be considered a refugee if she fears that she may be persecuted in her home country because of her refusal to inflict genital mutilation on her baby daughter, or to wear heavy, restrictive clothing. There has been similar progress on issues of gender-based persecution in Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland. In 1984, the European parliament determined that women facing cruel or inhuman treatment because they seemed to transgress social mores should be considered a particular social group for the purposes of determining refugee status. UNHCR has encouraged the parliament's member States (as well as all other countries) to formally adopt this interpretation.

Still, very few countries employ women staff in their refugee status determination procedures, despite the quite obvious reluctance of most refugee women to discuss sexual persecution with men. Many States dismiss allegations of sexual violence as irrelevant to refugee status. Indeed, many countries rarely consider the asylum claim of a married woman separately from her husband. Only sustained and active lobbying by UNHCR and other refugee groups can hope to change this situation.

Preparing refugees for independent life

The goal of most refugees is, ultimately, to return home, once conditions of peace and stability have been re-established. Women are no different — and of course should have their own say in such fundamental decisions as repatriation. Because refugee women are often single heads of households, with limited education or income-generating skills, well-designed and well-targeted development-oriented activities can be crucial to preparing them for independent lives when they return. Such activities should not be seen primarily as an attempt to influence long-held cultural values. Usually they are a common-sense assessment of the traditional role held by women in that society — taking into account the role of

Where are all the refugees?



Figures as of April 1995

Source: UNHCR

women in agriculture, animal husbandry or, more simply, the health and nutrition of their children. They are often crucial. In April 1993, the social services specialist participating in an emergency team sent to Benin quickly recognized that destitute single mothers were being forced into prostitution to survive. Implementation of income-generating activities saved many from this fate.

Action to raise the consciousness and power of refugee women can have incalculable and enduring benefits to an entire population.

Income-generating and skills-training activities in exile are often carried over to returnee communities, as part of UNHCR's small-scale Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) to boost infrastructure and development. In Nicaragua, "QIPFEMs" were designed specifically for returnee women, concentrating on non-traditional skills such as bee-keeping, agriculture and reforestation, and on the construction of hand-pumps, threshing mills and day-care centres to reduce women's domestic workload. Returnee women were also given loans to enable them to set up cooperatives and businesses. Contracts with UNHCR's implementing partners in Nicaragua commonly stipulated that women must benefit from at least 50 per cent of wage-earning, income-generating and training opportunities provided by QIPs, and should receive equal pay. As a result, the income, skills, expectations and confidence of returnee women rose dramatically, and traditional communities became familiar with the concept of women as economic actors.

The Cairo International Conference on Population and Development in September 1994 recognized that "reproductive health care and family planning are vital human rights". Those vital rights are still absent from many refugee camps. UNHCR and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have embarked on a series of joint activities to promote reproductive health for as many refugees as possible. A practical guidance manual for reproductive health is being developed, using the experience of dozens of field officers. The aim is to provide refugee health services with guidelines to deal with gynaecological diseases as well as with broken legs and cholera. Better health facilities will be able to treat complications resulting from the genital mutilation of baby girls, and the resulting tearing during rape or marital sex. They will provide female examiners and counselling on nutritional advice, AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as access to family-planning information.

Sustaining a culture

Women are the life-sustaining force of any refugee community. Together with their dependent children, they often form the numerical majority of a refugee population. They also play a central economic and social role. They have the power to nurture future generations, re-establishing the family and culture in exile, and re-creating it again on return to their homeland.

Although UNHCR has always intended that female refugees should receive equal, adequate and appropriate benefits, UNHCR activities have not always been planned with full regard to the needs, abilities and aspirations of refugee women. Neglect of their particular needs has at times meant that programmes, from health clinics to skills training, have benefited male refugees disproportionately. The result, in every case, has been an unnecessary and wasteful degree of dependency — weakening not only women, but the community as a whole.

Action to raise the consciousness and power of refugee women can have incalculable and enduring benefits to an entire population. "In exile, we women became very united, of necessity, although we did not know each other", says Maria Eugenia, who returned to El Salvador in 1988 after many years of exile in Honduras. "We were 11,000 refugees all together, most of us women. It was up to us to organize and promote our needs. We stated our problems and sought solutions in every area. We received training in areas like health and education and agriculture; people started to learn skills. We had chicken farms and different types of workshops, making clothes and shoes. When we returned, we had changed. Here, outside in the countryside, peasant women used to be ignored. We did not vote; we had no voice. Now, thanks to UNHCR, and to our organization while we were refugees, that has changed. We have a voice. We make it heard."

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